



Part 1: Introduction

**Rhode Island is an urban state.
Rhode Island is a forested state.**

This seeming dichotomy is the starting point for this plan. In recent decades, as Rhode Island has become more urban, it also has grown less forested. Most striking visibly, if not statistically, has been the loss of trees in the cities, where, until a generation ago, most streets were graced with majestic, mature trees. Is the decline of urban forests inevitable? Or can greater harmony be achieved between the dynamic growth sought by Rhode Islanders, and the beauty and benefits afforded by treed environs? What can Rhode Islanders, working together, do to reconcile our development needs with protection and re-generation of our tree resources?

The Premise

Healthy and productive urban and community forests are important assets for Rhode Island and its citizens, assets that, like other aspects of community infrastructure, must be carefully managed.

Most broadly conceived, this plan concerns itself with the role of trees in the built environment. Its inspiration is a desire to help Rhode Islanders strike a proper balance between the engineered world we create and the wondrous forested realm that envelopes and infuses it with life.

An underlying assumption of this plan is that, with careful planning, quality design, proper management, and prudent investment, Rhode Island's urban and community forests can be maintained and improved without negatively impacting the economic growth and development the state needs. The plan seeks to point the state and its communities toward this objective by providing information and establishing policies.

Rhode Island is more urban than the nation as a whole—

- *86 percent of the state's population is defined as "urban" by the 1990 US Census.*
- *Nationally, 75 percent of the population is considered urban.*

The state's eight cities collectively occupy less than 12 percent of the state's land area, but are home to over 52 percent of its people.

Approximately 55% of Rhode Island's total land area is woodlands (including forested wetlands).

From 1970 to 1988, the state's forest, farmland, and wetlands acreage declined by 8 percent, while developed land uses grew by nearly 40 percent.

As development spilled out from the central cities-- Providence, Pawtucket, and Woonsocket--during the post-World War II years, it spread into undeveloped areas--forests and farmland--surrounding the established city limits. Among the consequences of growth over the last 40 years has been the clearing of extensive tracts of forested lands.

The Dilemma

Rhode Island's urban and community forests provide many values and benefits to our state and its people. But, like its other natural assets, Rhode Island's forests are under pressure from two directions. The dispersal of growth outward from traditional urban areas is spurring the clearing of forest tracts in rural areas of the state. The trend toward using more land per household or development---a characteristic of post-World War II development patterns---is increasing land consumption.

Indeed, although our population and economy have grown, more of the impact on the state's tree resources has come from changes in development patterns and trends in land usage. Rhode Island's development of the last 30 years consumed open space, much of it woodlands, at a rate far faster than past trends would have suggested was necessary, given the net growth of population and productive capacity.

Virtually every activity we engage in--be it living in a home, shopping in a store, working in an office or factory, or enjoying ourselves at a movie or restaurant--consumes more land than it used to. Even within older cities, the need for more room per unit of activity has been felt, with considerable impact upon the state's urban tree resources.

The Plan

The aim of this plan is to influence future decision-making to improve Rhode Island's urban and community forest resources. By providing information on the nature of the threats facing urban and community forests and by establishing goals, policies, and strategies for dealing with these issues, the plan seeks to stimulate a greater awareness among those who can influence the fate of Rhode Island's forest lands. The plan does not mandate any particular action, but rather seeks to foster recognition and offer options and tools.

Relationship to previous plans

This plan for urban and community forestry is an element of Rhode Island's **State Guide Plan**. It complements the **Rhode Island Forest Resources Management Plan**, adopted as State Guide Plan Element 161 in 1984. While principally focused on proper management of Rhode Island's rural forests, the *Forest Resources Management Plan's* goals, policies and recommendations are applicable statewide, and must be considered in concert with this plan's strategies. Appendix A summarizes the Forest Resources Management Plan.

As elements of the State Guide Plan, these plans collectively set forth goals and policies for all Rhode Island's forests that must, under State law, be reflected in future updates of local comprehensive plans. In turn, the statutory requirement that local land use decisions be consistent with approved comprehensive plans will effect greater recognition of the need for proper management and conservation of the state's forests.

Scope of the plan

As the state's urban and community forestry plan, the scope of this document is statewide. Its policies have broad applicability to forested areas currently or potentially affected by urban-type development in *all* Rhode Island communities, whether they are generally urban, suburban, or rural in character.

The policies and recommendations of this plan, focused on the management of tree resources within a built environment--when construed and applied in conjunction with the State Forest Resources Management Plan's (cited above) guidance for rural "*working*" forests—are intended to advance the effectiveness of local stewardship of the state's tree resources towards the twin goals of a healthy, sustainable economy *and* environment.

The goals and policies established by this plan will be reflected in future updates of comprehensive plans, and ultimately the zoning ordinances and land development regulations of communities throughout the state.

Insuring that the benefits and values of tree resources are fully considered and planned for in future development decisions is a proactive means for conserving and restoring Rhode Island's urban and community forests.

Although the terms “urban forestry” and “community forestry” are alternately used in the plan depending on context or emphasis; overall, the plan is concerned with advancing sound forestry management practices on a statewide basis, and promoting use of the best management tools and strategies appropriate for particular situations or contexts.

Organization of the plan

The plan is organized in six parts. Following this introduction, Part Two presents background information on the growth of urban forestry as a discipline. Recognizing that the vitality of Rhode Island's urban forests is largely affected by economic decisions, Part Three describes the myriad benefits and economic values that urban forest resources offer. Part Four surveys urban forest resources and programs currently in place in Rhode Island. Part Five identifies the key issues facing Rhode Island's urban forests. Policies established in Part Six seek to integrate consideration of forest resources within the plans, programs and projects of governments, businesses and private individuals that will shape Rhode Island's future landscape.

